



HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS ON THE INTERNATIONAL ARENAS

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ABSTRACT

This article provides information about human rights and freedoms, as well as highlights the leading role of the United Nations (UN) in the protection of human rights. It includes detailed information about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Additionally, a number of international treaties that serve as the foundation for human rights and freedoms are also mentioned. At the end of the article, you can learn about the "TOP" countries that are considered leaders in the protection of human rights and freedoms around the world.

Human rights are the fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to every person simply because they are human, regardless of who they are. These rights apply equally to all people without distinction based on race, gender, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of thought and expression, the right to work and education, and many other rights. Every person should be entitled to these rights without discrimination.

International human rights law defines the obligations of governments to act in certain ways or refrain from certain acts in order to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups.

One of the greatest achievements of the **United Nations (UN)** is the establishment of a universal and internationally protected legal framework for human rights — a system that all nations can adhere to and all individuals can strive toward. The UN has outlined a wide range of internationally recognized rights, including civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. It has also established mechanisms to promote and protect these rights and to assist states in meeting their obligations.

The foundation of this legal system lies in the **UN Charter adopted in 1945** and the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Since then, the UN has gradually expanded human rights legislation to include specific standards for the protection of women, children, persons with disabilities, minorities, and other vulnerable groups. These individuals are now entitled to rights that



protect them from forms of discrimination that have been widespread in many societies for years.

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** is considered a landmark document in the history of human rights. It was drafted by representatives from various legal and cultural backgrounds across the world and was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on **December 10, 1948**, under **Resolution 217 A (III)**, as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations.

This document was the first to set out fundamental human rights that should be universally protected for all of humanity. Since its adoption in 1948, the UDHR has been translated into over 500 languages, making it the most translated document in the world. It has inspired the constitutions of many newly independent states and newly established democracies.

Together with the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** and its two **Optional Protocols** (concerning complaints procedures and the abolition of the death penalty), and the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** and its Optional Protocol, the UDHR forms the **International Bill of Human Rights**.

Since 1945, numerous international human rights treaties and instruments have further expanded the scope of international human rights law. These include:

- The **Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide** (1948),
- The **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination** (1965),
- The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (1979),
- The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989),
- The **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (2006), and other similar instruments.

According to several sources, countries that lead the world in protecting human rights include **Switzerland, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland**. These nations typically score high in human rights indexes, demonstrate a strong commitment to the principles of human rights, and maintain robust legal systems for their protection.

Human rights are widely respected in Switzerland, which is one of the oldest democracies in Europe. Switzerland consistently ranks among the highest in international ratings for civil liberties and political rights. Human rights are at the center of the country's system of core values, which is reflected in the Federal Constitution. According to the Foreign Policy Strategy 2016–2019 prepared by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the principles of peace promotion, mutual respect, equality, and non-discrimination occupy a central place in the country's foreign policy. Switzerland is considered a state that has joined (signed) all major international legal documents on human rights. It is also the official depository state for the Geneva Conventions. Many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) related to human rights are located or established in Geneva, including the Red Cross. Switzerland is not only a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council but also one of its founders. The permanent headquarters of this Council is also located in



Geneva. In addition, respect for human rights and the promotion of democracy are recognized as one of the five key strategic goals in Switzerland's foreign and domestic policy. Switzerland is a participant in and active influencer of many international mechanisms aimed at promoting human rights. The establishment of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2006 was initiated by Switzerland. This council was created to replace the former UN Commission on Human Rights, and Switzerland played a leading role in its formation. Since then, Switzerland has been a consistent and active member in the Council's advocacy and implementation activities. Switzerland's third term as a member of this Council was recently confirmed, following the reforms recommended during the 2012 Universal Periodic Review (UPR). These UPR recommendations included improving gender equality, reforming the juvenile justice system, reducing racial discrimination, and combating the excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies. In Switzerland's latest submission to the UN, the international protection of human rights was recorded as one of its three main voluntary pledges. These include the global abolition of the death penalty, strict punishment for human rights violators, combating discrimination based on sexual orientation, and protecting human rights defenders. For Switzerland, expanding the Human Rights Council and strengthening its mandate is a priority, as promoting universal respect for human rights is one of the core values outlined in the Swiss Federal Constitution. These goals were clearly expressed in Switzerland's 2015 application to renew its HRC membership. That application proposed initiatives such as increasing NGO participation, educating all states on global human rights governance, and financially supporting the participation of delegates from economically disadvantaged countries in Geneva. Switzerland has ratified many important international conventions on human rights. These include the UN Convention against Torture, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aimed at abolishing the death penalty, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). At the same time, Switzerland fully supports the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and pursues policies based on it. Despite some complexities related to Switzerland's federal and cantonal structure, any international treaty ratified by the country automatically enters into force as national law. That is, it does not require additional implementation through separate national laws. This approach serves as an effective legal mechanism for Switzerland's efforts to raise human rights standards. The Swiss Federal Constitution lists human dignity and equality as the most important principles. These principles are reflected in numerous federal laws and practices, including anti-discrimination legislation, laws ensuring gender equality, and norms protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, women, children, and ethnic minorities. In this regard, Switzerland is not only a signatory to international conventions but also possesses a national legal system that promptly and fully implements them. As a country that supports the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Switzerland acknowledges the vital role these individuals and groups play in promoting human rights at the international level and values their pressure on states to improve human rights. Switzerland has implemented the "Swiss Guidelines on the



Protection of Human Rights Defenders" and is working to standardize the protection of human rights defenders both domestically and during legal missions abroad. At the same time, Switzerland is also considered advanced in the area of digital privacy rights. On September 29, 2022, a parliamentary initiative was introduced by MP Samuel Bendahan to include the right to digital privacy in the Federal Constitution. On June 18, 2023, this new right was added to the Geneva cantonal constitution after a public vote in which more than 94% of voters supported it. Switzerland ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1997 and has since worked actively to strengthen children's rights. In 2011, the Federal Social Insurance Office launched a program to protect youth from violence and to educate about protection from harmful media content. Complementing these efforts, organizations such as Pro Juventute and the Swiss Foundation for Child Protection work with victims of various forms of violence against children across the country. Internationally, Switzerland has joined the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. This convention requires all signatory states to recognize sexual violence against children as a criminal offense. However, international human rights reports have indicated that the level of violence against children in Switzerland remains high. For example, in 2014, a single children's hospital recorded 450 cases of abuse, of which 33% were sexual abuse, 35% physical abuse, and the rest involved psychological abuse and neglect. Since the second Universal Periodic Review in October 2012, some positive changes have been observed in the protection of children's rights, mainly related to the regulation of sentencing for juvenile offenders, but these changes have not significantly affected violence statistics. Switzerland abolished the death penalty for all crimes in 1992. This is enshrined in the country's Constitution, and since then, Switzerland has actively supported the global abolition of the death penalty. Switzerland considers the right to life and human dignity to be the core elements of human rights and aims to achieve the global abolition of the death penalty by 2025. In cooperation with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Switzerland organizes World Day Against the Death Penalty annually on October 10. In collaboration with the UN, it helped draft resolutions on a moratorium on the death penalty, which was approved by the Human Rights Council in 2015. Since 2007, this resolution has been submitted to the UN General Assembly every two years. Additionally, Switzerland works with international organizations such as the Death Penalty Project, the International Commission of Jurists, and the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty. Switzerland has also ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (focused on abolishing the death penalty), Protocol No. 13 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Human rights in the Kingdom of Denmark are protected through the Constitution of the Kingdom of Denmark (Danmarks Riges Grundlov), which applies equally in Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. In addition, the country has ratified international human rights treaties, which also ensure legal protection. Denmark played a key role in the adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights and the establishment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In 1987, the Danish Parliament (Folketinget) established the Danish Centre for Human Rights, which now operates as the Danish Institute for Human Rights. Although Denmark and other Scandinavian countries have historically been known as



"defenders of international law and human rights," recent years have seen certain issues emerge, including violence against women, matters related to the rights of LGBT individuals, and extensive surveillance and control over socially marginalized groups. These issues have also been noted by international organizations. Despite this, in the 2024 "Freedom in the World" report by Freedom House, Denmark scored 97 out of 100 points and was recognized as a "free" country. The Kingdom of Denmark is a constitutional monarchy. The Constitutional Act (Grundloven), adopted on June 5, 1849, defines the democratic foundations of the Kingdom of Denmark. This constitution has been amended three times since 1849, with the most significant amendment taking place in 1953. That amendment forms the basis of the current constitution and established a clear constitutional authority allowing Denmark to share its sovereignty with other states. This change was made to create a legal basis for Denmark's membership in the European Union. While the primary purpose of the constitution is to limit the powers of the monarchy, it also guarantees the human rights and civil and political rights of citizens. These rights include personal liberty (Article 71), freedom of speech (Article 77), and freedom of assembly (Article 79). In addition, the constitution guarantees freedom of religion (Article 67), although this freedom must not violate public order or morality. The rights enshrined in the constitution are given a "special status," and as stated in Article 88 of the constitution, these rights are considered the "highest source" of Danish law. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is an international treaty ratified on September 3, 1953, by the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, aimed at protecting the rule of law and strengthening democracy in Europe. This convention provided the first institutional mechanism for overseeing and implementing human rights across Europe. To achieve this goal, the convention established two key mechanisms: the European Commission of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR or ECtHR). Although the convention was ratified in 1953, it was only incorporated into Danish domestic law on April 29, 1992. Its incorporation into national legislation granted Danish courts the authority to enforce the convention's requirements. Currently, this convention is the only international treaty on human rights that is legally binding within Danish law. The main civil and political rights guaranteed by this convention include the right to liberty, the right to a fair trial, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of expression. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) was established in 1959 based on the European Convention on Human Rights and is the official court of the Council of Europe. Its function is to examine and rule on complaints regarding human rights violations. During the initial stages of the court's establishment, Scandinavian countries, including Denmark, were among the first to accept the court's optional clauses regarding jurisdiction. This played a crucial role in solidifying the court's political legitimacy. Denmark and other Nordic countries actively participated in creating the ECtHR system and shaping its final form. Denmark is considered by some to be one of the strictest anti-immigration countries in Europe. The population is divided on the issue of immigration: some support accepting immigrants, while others call for restrictive measures. In 2016, Denmark canceled an agreement with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to accept 500 refugees annually. In 2018, Denmark announced its withdrawal from the UN refugee quota system, transferring the decision-making power to the government instead of the parliament. At the end of 2018, the Danish



government included funding in the 2019 budget for placing convicted but non-deportable foreign criminals on Lindholm Island, a former animal disease laboratory. This policy was widely criticized as "inhumane" and "hateful." In January 2021, the EU's Migration Integration site reported that Denmark had refused to accept EU refugee rules and declined participation in the voluntary relocation scheme within the EU. In March 2021, the Danish government imposed limits on the number of "non-Western" immigrants, revoked residence permits for refugees and vulnerable immigrants. Large national studies showed that one-third of refugees were not fully protected. On May 19, 2021, the Danish government faced strong criticism from EU lawmakers, the UN, and human rights organizations for revoking the residence permits of Syrian citizens. Despite the Danish government's claims that Syria was safe, international organizations considered this approach dangerous, inhumane, and illegal. In 2014, Denmark ratified the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, which aims to combat violence and sexual violence and criminalizes non-consensual sexual acts. However, Danish legislation defined rape based on "physical violence, threats, or coercion," rather than on "consent." This approach was criticized, as it implies consent when the victim does not physically resist. In 2014, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights reported that Denmark had the highest rate of violence against women in Europe. Amnesty International reports note that more than 5,100 women become victims of rape or attempted rape annually. Due to a lack of trust in the justice system and mistreatment of victims, rape cases are rarely reported. In April 2018, the opposition proposed incorporating a "consent-based" definition in accordance with the Istanbul Convention, but it was rejected by parliament. The Council of Europe's GREVIO group called on Denmark to base its sexual violence laws on the criterion of "freely given consent." On January 18, 1996, Denmark ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of 1989 and, on September 13, 2007, supported the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The only officially recognized indigenous people in Denmark are the Greenlandic Inuit. Over 70,000 Inuit live in Denmark and Greenland, but they are not listed as a distinct indigenous people in official state records. Greenlandic Inuit are Danish citizens and, due to their status related to the European Union, are also EU citizens. The Inuit are indigenous to the Arctic, historically inhabiting northern Greenland, Canada, and Alaska. From the 18th century to the 1970s, the Danish government (Dano-Norwegian until 1814) sought to assimilate the Inuit, forcing them to adopt Danish language, culture, and religion. During the 1950s-60s, a policy of "Danishization" was implemented, which included discrimination and unequal treatment of Inuit. Migrant professionals were paid more than local workers, families were relocated, and children were separated from their parents and sent to Denmark for education. Although Greenlandic Inuit in Denmark now have equal rights as other citizens, they still face numerous social, cultural, and linguistic challenges. They are not officially recognized as an ethnic minority. In Greenland, Inuit still preserve traditional customs such as hunting and fishing. In 1953, Greenland was made a full part of the Kingdom of Denmark, but this process involved displacement of populations and loss of traditional lifestyles. In 1979, Greenland gained autonomy, which was expanded in 2009. However, to this day, Greenland's autonomy is not guaranteed by the Danish Constitution. It is still considered a people without official statehood and does not form the majority population of the Kingdom of Denmark. Greenland



is not represented in the Council of State or the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom but has limited political representation through elected MPs in the Danish Parliament.

In Finland, human rights in law and practice include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly. Fundamental individual rights are guaranteed by the Constitution of Finland, legal documents, and international human rights treaties ratified by the government. The Constitution defines an independent judiciary. Finland ranks high globally in areas such as democracy, press freedom, and human development. Nevertheless, Amnesty International has expressed concern about certain issues in Finland. These include the possibility of allowing CIA rendition flights (i.e., secret transfers of detainees to other countries), the imprisonment of conscientious objectors, and discrimination against Roma and other ethnic or linguistic minority groups. Freedom of speech for Finnish citizens is guaranteed by Article 12 of the Constitution. This article grants individuals the right to express their opinions in any form and states that no one should obstruct this right. However, the article also notes that additional regulations on freedom of speech may be specified by law. For instance, restrictions may be imposed by law on children's television programming and media. In addition to constitutional guarantees, Finland is a party to the European Convention on Human Rights. According to Article 10 of this convention, individuals have the right "to hold opinions and to receive and impart information," and this right should not be obstructed by the state. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found that Finland had violated Article 10 of the Convention. This occurred after journalists published private information about a woman involved in a dispute with a government official in two journals. Finnish courts ruled this as an invasion of the woman's privacy and fined the journalists. However, the ECtHR held that public interest outweighed the woman's privacy in this case and that the fines negatively impacted press freedom. In 2011, Finnish artist Ulla Karttunen was convicted of distributing child pornography for displaying photos of children in sexual poses as artwork. She appealed to the ECtHR, but the court rejected her case, prioritizing the protection of children's rights. In 2015, former Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's ex-partner Susan Ruusunen published a book about their personal relationship. She was fined for violating privacy. The ECtHR upheld the Finnish court's decision, ruling that the Prime Minister's right to privacy outweighed public interest. The idea of freedom of expression and press freedom was pioneered by Finnish Enlightenment thinker and parliamentarian Anders Chydenius. His ideas led to the world's first Freedom of the Press Act in 1766 in Sweden, which abolished mandatory pre-publication censorship. However, blasphemy and criticism of the monarch remained prohibited. The law was repealed and reinstated several times. During the era of the Russian Empire, censorship in Finland was imposed by the Russian government. Following protests in Russia in 1905, the Tsar issued the November Manifesto, restoring freedom of speech and the press. After gaining independence, Finland formally enshrined these freedoms in its new constitution and generally respected them. Nevertheless, during World War II, war censorship existed. In the 1930s, some leftist literature was banned. Additionally, during the period of Finlandization, when Finland maintained cautious relations with the Soviet Union, major media outlets practiced self-censorship, avoiding topics that might anger the Soviet government. Today, blasphemy and incitement to ethnic hatred remain illegal in Finnish law.



In April 2016, Finland's national broadcaster Yle came under pressure from Finance Minister Alexander Stubb and tax authorities, who demanded information related to the Panama Papers leak. This raised concerns about freedom of speech and the media's right to report on corruption. Stubb had publicly stated multiple times his willingness to pardon financial crimes related to tax havens. Tax authorities threatened to obtain search warrants for Yle's editorial office and journalists' homes. From 1990 to 2015, dozens of Finnish lawyers and businesspeople were found to have established offshore companies through Mossack Fonseca.

Women's rights and gender equality in Finland: After New Zealand and Australia, Finland was the third country in the world to grant women the right to vote. In 1907, Finland became the first country to allow women not only to vote but also to run for parliamentary office. The first female minister elected to the Finnish Parliament was Miina Sillanpää, who served as the Second Minister for Social Affairs from 1926 to 1927. Tarja Halonen became the country's first female president, serving from 2000 to 2012. In 1878, Charlotta Backman was appointed the first female director of a post office in Porvoo. In 1886, Vera Hjält opened a patented woodworking factory and in 1903 became Finland's first female labor inspector. She actively fought against workplace discrimination against women and served ten years as a member of parliament. Tekla Hultin was the first woman in Finland (then Alexander University) to earn a doctoral degree. She continued her studies in Russia and France and served in parliament for 15 years. Until 1926, women had to obtain exceptions to be employed in public service due to their gender. Full equality in this area was only achieved in 1975. Finnish women have the right to inherit and own property. For example, Aurora Karamzin (1808–1902) inherited property from her former husband, Russian count Pavel Demidov. She later became active in social welfare, health, and education. In 1867, she founded the Helsinki Deaconess Institute. On March 6, 1988, for the first time, women were ordained as clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. In 2010, the first female bishop was elected. However, human rights violations against women remain a persistent issue in Finland. Each year, about 20 women are killed by their husbands or former partners. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International have criticized the lack of fully implemented services for victims of violence, as stipulated by the Istanbul Convention. These services remain uneven and limited depending on the region.

Gender equality in the workplace: The UN Human Rights Committee has expressed concern about gender inequality in Finland's labor market. In 2013, the wage gap between men and women was 8%. Although men were offered more opportunities for professional development, women were more likely to apply for such opportunities. According to Finnish law, any organization with more than 30 employees is required to have a gender equality plan. In August 2013, many companies failed to comply with this requirement due to inadequate enforcement. According to laws from 1945, women earned only 80% of the salary of men working in the same positions. By 2018, it was estimated that men earned €70,000 more on average than women over a ten-year period.

Children's rights: Finland has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is illegal to involve children in labor, force them into begging, or subject them to any form of abuse. Corporal punishment of children in unjustified situations is also prohibited. There are no official statistics on teenage prostitution in Finland, but purchasing or attempting to purchase sexual services from minors is a crime. In such cases, legal responsibility always lies with the buyer.



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